WE CLAIM:

1. A substantially three-dimensional article having the exterior thereof shaped to define a textured steganographic pattern, the pattern encoding a plural-bit data payload, the existence of said data payload not being evident to a human viewer of the article, but the plural bits of payload data being detectable by computer processing of visible light scan data corresponding to said textured steganographic pattern, the data payload including date data.

2. An article used in health care, according to claim 1.

3. A container for an article, the container having the exterior thereof shaped to define a textured steganographic pattern, the pattern encoding a plural-bit data payload, the existence of said data payload not being evident to a human viewer of the article, but the plural bits of payload data being detectable by computer processing of visible light scan data corresponding to said textured steganographic pattern, the data payload including date data.

4. A container for a health care product, according to claim 3.

5. A container for a pharmaceutical, according to claim 4.

6. A method of processing a substantially three-dimensional physical object having a plural-bit code steganographically encoded thereon, the encoding taking the form of texturing that shapes the exterior of said object, the method comprising:
    acquiring visible light scan data corresponding to at least a portion of said shaped exterior;
    discerning the plural-bit code from said scan data;
    by reference to said plural-bit code, determining date information; and

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at least in part by reference to said determined date information, determining if a transaction involving the object should be refused.

7. The method of claim 6 in which the date information specifies a date beyond which a transaction involving the object should be refused.

8. A component part for a vehicle, the part having a surface region on which is formed a seemingly random texture pattern, said pattern encoding machine-readable data.

9. The component part of claim 8, wherein said texture pattern is formed by applying a patterned layer of material over a smooth surface.

10. The component part of claim 8 wherein said vehicle has an identifier associated therewith, and the machine readable data includes said vehicle identifier.

11. The component part of claim 8 wherein said machine readable data includes data associated with a date of fabrication of said component part.

12. The component part of claim 8 wherein said machine readable data includes data associated with a place of fabrication of said component part.

13. The component part of claim 8 wherein said machine readable data includes data indicating a specification with which the component part complies.

14. The component part of claim 8 wherein said machine readable data represents at least 32 bits of information.

15. The component part of claim 14, wherein said information is encoded with redundancy, permitting accurate decoding of the information nothwithstanding localized corruption to the pattern.

5   16. The component part of claim 8 wherein on casual human inspection, said texture pattern looks like pebbling of the surface.

17. The component part of claim 8 wherein said texture pattern has a depth of 250 microns or less.

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18. A component part for an automobile according to claim 8.

19. A bolt according to claim 8.

15   20. A component part for a vehicle, the component part having a textured surface region, said texture comprising a rectangular array of cells, a pattern of said array of cells encoding machine-readable data.